Santo landowners threaten to seize machinery over unpaid logged trees

By Hilaire Bule Apr 8, 2025 0

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The round logs piled at Palekula, Santo, were felled by Vanuatu Forest Industry Ltd for export to China. Photo: Hilaire Bule | File By Hilaire Bule

Several landowners from Santo are prepared to seize heavy machinery from Vanuatu Forest Industry Limited (VFIL), the company currently involved in logging activities on the island.

In 2023, the Chinese Embassy voiced its concern to *Daily Post*, clarifying that VFIL is a Vanuatu-based company, not a Chinese enterprise because the company's owner, Mr. Li Hong Qi, holds a Vanuatu passport as a naturalised citizen.

One of the landowners, Chief Jerome Natu of Teproma, said it has been over a year since they have been waiting for payment for their trees. He added that the logs cut down by the company are no longer usable.

"Trees like Nakatambol and Melektree are already rotten, and we are still waiting for payment. I'm referring to the trees currently logged and piled at Palekula, but there are also logs at Big Bay Bush and other areas of Santo that have not been exported or paid for by VFIL," Chief Natu said.

He mentioned that the company has five bulldozers and other heavy machinery on Santo and that the landowners are ready to take action if payment is not received.

Chief Natu mentioned that they contacted the Department of Forests (DoF) a few weeks ago, but they were informed that the Parliament had not yet approved the budget at that time. Now that the department has been allocated its budget, the landowners are demanding payment for their trees.

Director General (DG) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Biosecurity (MALFB), Timothy Tumukon, told *Daily Post* that VFIL was supposed to pay the landowners VT70 million but has yet to make the payment.

DG Tumukon added that he had written to the Office of the Attorney General for legal advice before any payment can be made.

Currently, the export of round logs is banned by the Vanuatu Government. The Forestry Act only permits the export of processed timber, but the government has granted an exemption to VFIL for a trial period.

When *Daily Post* first reported on this issue in 2023, VFIL failed to submit the report on the first export of round logs to the government. This led to the ban on the company's ability to ship the logs that had already been cut to China and the enforcement of the Forestry Act concerning the export of round logs.

VFIL has operated in Vanuatu since 2020 and has been endorsed by the Council of Ministers to conduct operations on the island of Santo, particularly in areas destroyed by a cyclone, where the trees were to be utilised.

According to reports from the DoF, the company applied to produce wood chips on the island of Santo and made promises to build schools, roads, and other facilities for the landowners in return.

Chief Natu described the situation as "daylight robbery," as none of the promised schools or roads have been constructed.

"The people of Big Bay agreed for VFIL to log their land to build their roads, and they are still waiting for those facilities. The company didn't even maintain their roads," he said.

VFIL denies allegations

When contacted by *Vanuatu Daily Post* yesterday regarding the claims of unpaid logged trees, VFIL denied the allegations.

"Following an internal investigation, the allegations mentioned are entirely unfounded," VFIL stated.

"Vanuatu Forest Industry has never defaulted on payments to any landowners under signed agreements. All transactions have been fully executed in strict compliance with contractual agreements and legal regulations."

In response to DG Tumukon's statement that approximately VT70 million remains unpaid, the company responded, "We have not received any official or written notification of such claims from his office, nor have we been formally queried by any government department on this matter.

"We welcome transparent, legally compliant investigations and stand ready to cooperate fully with relevant government authorities."

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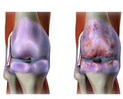

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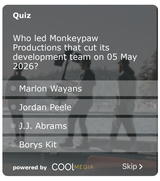

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